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THE IDOLS

BY

ROMAIN ROLLAND

TOGETHER WITH A LETTER BY M. ROLLAND TO DR. VAN EEDEN

ON

The Rights of Small Nationalities

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Trinity Street.

London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

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1915.



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ROMAIN ROLLAND

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Translated by
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Magdalene College

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The translator wishes to record his indebtedness to Dr. Raffaello Piccoli, to Miss I. Turner, of Newnham College, and to Mr. B. W. Downs, of Christ's College, for assistance in the preparation of the English version for the press.

THE IDOLS.

For more than forty centuries it has been the effort of great minds who have attained liberty to extend this blessing to others ; to liberate humanity and to teach men to see reality without fear or error, to look themselves in the face without false pride or false humility and to recognise their weakness and their strength, that they may know their true position in the universe. They have illumined the path with the brightness of their lives and their example, like the star of the magi, that mankind may have light.

Their efforts have failed. For more than forty centuries humanity has remained in bondage—I do not say to masters (for such are of the order of the flesh of which I am not speaking here ; and their chains break sooner or later) but to the phantoms of their own minds. Such servitude comes from within. We grow faint in the endeavour to cut the bonds which bind mankind, who straightway tie them again to be more firmly enthralled. Of every liberator men make a master. Every ideal which ought to liberate is transformed into a clumsy Idol. The history of humanity is the history of Idols and of their successive reigns ; and as humanity grows older the power of the Idol seems to wax greater and more destructive.

At first the divinities were of wood, of stone, or of metal. Those at any rate were not proof against the axe or against fire. Others followed that no material force could reach, for they were graven in the invisible mind. Yet all aspired to material dominion, and to secure for them that dominion the peoples of the world have poured out their best blood :—Idols of religions and of nationality : the Idol of liberty whose reign was established in Europe by the armies of the *sans culotte* at the point of the bayonet. The masters have changed, the slaves are still the same. Our century has made the acquaintance of two new species. The Idol of Race, at first the outcome

of noble ideas, became in the laboratories of spectacled savants the Moloch which Germany hurled herself against France in 1870 and which her enemies now wish to use against the Germany of to-day. The latest on the scene is that authentic product of German science, fraternally allied to the labours of industry, of commerce and of the firm of Krupp—the Idol of Kultur surrounded by its Levites, the thinkers of Germany.

The common feature of the cult of all Idols is the adaptation of an ideal to the evil instincts of mankind. Man cultivates the vices which are profitable to him, but feels the necessity of legitimising them; being unwilling to sacrifice them, he must idealise them. That is why the problem at which he has never ceased to labour throughout the centuries has been to harmonise his ideals with his own mediocrity. He has always succeeded. The crowd has no difficulty here. It sets side by side its virtues and its vices, its heroism and its meanness. The force of its passions and the rapid course of the days which carry it along cause it to forget its lack of logic.

But the intelligent few cannot satisfy themselves with so little effort. Not that they are, as is often said, less readily swayed by passion. This is a grave error; the richer a life becomes the more does it offer for passion to devour, and history sufficiently shews the terrifying paroxysms to which the lives of religious leaders and revolutionaries have attained. But these toilers in the spirit love careful work, and are repelled by popular modes of thought which perpetually break through the meshes of reasoning. They have to make a more closely woven net in which instinct and idea, cost what it may, combine to form a stouter tissue. They thus achieve monstrous chef d'oeuvres. Give an intellectual any ideal and any evil passion and he will always succeed in harmonising the twain. The love of God and the love of mankind have been invoked in order to burn, kill and pillage. The fraternity of 1793 was sister to the Holy Guillotine. We have in our time seen Churchmen seeking and finding in the Gospels the justification of Banking and of War. Since the outbreak of the War a clergyman of Wurtemburg established the fact that “neither Christ nor John the Baptist nor the apostles desired to suppress militarism.”* A clever intellectual is a conjuror in ideas. “Nothing in my hands—nothing up my sleeves.” The great trick is to extract

* The Evangelical pastor Schrenck in an article on “War and the New Testament,” quoted with approval by the Rev. Ch. Covevou in the *Journal religieux* of Neuchâtel, Nov. 14.

from any given idea its precise contrary—war from the Sermon on the Mount, or, like Professor Ostwald, the military dictatorship of the Kaiser from the dream of an intellectual internationalism. For such conjurors these things are but child's-play.

Let us expose them, by examining the words of this Dr. Ostwald, who has appeared during the last few months as the Baptist of the Gospel of the spiked helmet.

Here is the Idol to begin with—Kultur (made in Germany), with a capital K “*rectiligne et de quatre pointes, comme un cheval de frise*” as Miguel de Unamuno wrote to me. All around are little gods, the children of its loins: Kulturstaat, Kulturbund, Kulturimperium.

“I am now (it is the voice of Ostwald†) going to explain to you the great secret of Germany. We, or rather the Germanic race, have discovered the factor of *Organisation*. Other peoples still live under the régime of individualism while we are under that of *Organisation*. The stage of *Organisation* is a more advanced stage of civilisation.”

It is surely clear that, like those Missionaries who, in order to carry the Christian faith to Heathen peoples, secure the co-operation of a squadron and a landing party which straightway establish in the idolatrous country commercial stores protected by a ring of cannon, German intelligence cannot without selfishness keep her treasures to herself. She is obliged to share them.

“Germany wishes to *organise* Europe, for Europe has hitherto not been *organised*. With us everything tends to elicit from each individual the maximal output in the direction most favourable for society. That for us is liberty in its highest form.”

We may well pause to marvel at this way of talking about human “culture” as though it were a question of asparagus and artichokes. Of this happiness, and these advantages, this maximal output, this market-garden culture, this liberty of artichokes subjected to a judicious forcing process Professor Ostwald does not wish to deprive the other peoples of Europe. As they are so unlightened as not to acquiesce with enthusiasm, “War will make them participate in the form of this organisation in our higher civilisation.”

Thereupon the chemist-philosopher who is also in his leisure hours a politician and a strategist sketches in bold outline the picture of the victories of Germany and a remodelled Europe—a United States of Europe under the paternal sceptre

†In a declaration to the editor of the Swedish paper *Dagen*.

of his mailed Kaiser : England crushed, France disarmed and Russia dismembered. His colleague Haeckel completes this joyous *expose* by dividing Belgium, the British Empire and the North of France—like Perrette of the fable before her pitcher broke. Unfortunately neither Haeckel nor Ostwald tell us if their plan for the establishment of this higher civilisation included the destruction of the Halle of Ypres, of the Library at Louvain, of the Cathedral of Reims. After all these conquests, divisions and devastations let us not overlook this wonderful sentence of which Ostwald certainly did not realise the sinister buffoonery—worthy of a Molière—“ You know that I am a pacifist.” However far the high priests of a cult may allow their emotion to carry them, their profession of faith still retains a certain diplomatic reserve which does not hamper their followers.

Thus the Kulturmenschen. But the zeal of their Levites must frequently disturb the serenity of Moses and Aaron—Haeckel and Ostwald—by its intemperate frankness. I do not know what they think of the article of Thomas Mann which appeared in the November number of the *Neue Rundschau*, “ Thoughts in war time.” But I do know what certain French intellectuals will think of it. Germany could not offer them a more terrible weapon against herself.

In an access of delirious pride and exasperated fanaticism Mann employs his envenomed pen to justify the worst accusations that have been made against Germany. While an Ostwald endeavours to identify the cause of Kultur with that of civilisation, Mann proclaims—“ They have nothing in common. The present war is that of Kultur (i.e. of Germany) against civilisation.” And pushing this outrageous boast of pride to the point of madness, he defines civilisation as Reason (Vernunft, Aufklaerung), Gentleness (Sittigung, Saenftigung), Spirit (Geist, Aufloesung), and Kultur as “ a spiritual organisation of the world ” which does not exclude “ bloody savagery.” Kultur is “ the sublimation of the demoniacal ” (die Sublimierung des Daemonischen). It is “ above morality, above reason, and above science.” While Ostwald and Haeckel see in militarism merely an arm or instrument of which Kultur makes use to secure victory, Thomas Mann affirms that Kultur and Militarism are brothers—their ideal is the same, their aim the same, their principle the same. Their enemy is peace, is spirit (Ja der Geist is civil, ist buergerlich). He finally dares to inscribe on his own and his country’s banner the words, “ Law is the friend of the weak ; it would reduce the world to a level. War brings out strength.”

“ Das Gesetz is der Freund des Schwachen,
 Moechte gern die Welt verflachen
 Aber der Krieg laesst die Kraft erscheinen.” . . .

In this criminal glorification of violence, Thomas Mann himself has been surpassed. Ostwald preached the victory of Kultur, if necessary by Force: Mann proved that Kultur is Force. Someone was needed to cast aside the last veil of reserve and say “Force alone. All else be silent.” We have read extracts from the cynical article in which Maximilian Harden, treating the desperate efforts of his government to excuse the violation of Belgian neutrality as feeble lies, dared to write “Why on earth all this fuss? Might creates our Right. Did a powerful man ever submit himself to the crazy pretensions or to the judgment of a band of weaklings.”

What a testimony to the madness into which German intelligence has been precipitated by pride and struggle, and to the moral anarchy of this Empire, whose organisation is imposing only to the eyes of them who do not see further than the façade! Who cannot see the weakness of a government which gags its socialist press and yet tolerates such an insulting contradiction as this? Who does not see that such words defame Germany before the whole world for centuries to come. These miserable intellectuals imagine that with their display of infuriated Nietzscheism and Bismarckism they are acting heroically and impressing the world. They merely disgust it. They wish to be believed. People are only too ready to believe them. The whole of Germany will be made responsible for the delirium of a few writers. Germany will one day realise she has had no more deadly enemy than her own intellectuals.

I write here without prejudice, for I am certainly not proud of our French intellectuals. The Idol of Race, or of Civilisation, or of Latinity, which they so greatly abuse, does not satisfy me. I do not like any Idol—not even that of Humanity. But at any rate those to which my country bows down are less dangerous. They are not aggressive, and, moreover, there remains even in the most fanatical of our intellectuals a basis of native common sense, of which the Germans of whom I have just spoken seem to have lost all trace. But it must be admitted that on neither side have they brought honour to the cause of reason, which they have not been able to protect against the winds of violence and folly. There is a saying of Emerson's which is applicable to their failure: “Nothing is more rare in any man than an act of his own.” Their acts and their writings have come to them from others,

from outside, from public opinion, blind and menacing. I do not wish to condemn those who have been obliged to remain silent either because they are in the armies, or because the censorship which rules in countries involved in war has imposed silence upon them. But the unheard-of weakness with which the leaders of thought have everywhere abdicated to the collective madness has certainly proved their lack of character. Certain somewhat paradoxical passages in my own writings have caused me at times to be styled an anti-intellectual ; an absurd charge to bring against one who has given his life to the worship of thought. But it is true that Intellectualism has often appeared to me as a mere caricature of Thought—Thought militated, deformed, and petrified, powerless, not only to dominate the drama of life, but even to understand it. And the events of to-day have proved me more in the right than I wished to be. The intellectual lives too often in the realm of shadows, of ideas. Ideas have no existence in themselves, but only through the hopes or experiences which can fill them. They are either summaries, or hypotheses ; frames for what has been or what will be ; convenient or necessary formulae. One cannot live and act without them, but the evil is that people make them into oppressive realities. No one contributes more to this than the intellectual, whose trade it is to handle them, who, biased by his profession, is always tempted to subordinate reality to them. Let there supervene a collective passion which completes his blindness, and it will be cast in the form of the idea which can best serve its purpose : it transfers its life-blood to that idea, and the idea magnifies and glorifies it in turn. Nothing is more long-lived in a man than a phantom which his own mind has created, a phantom in which are combined the madness of his heart and the madness of his head. Hence the intellectuals in the present crisis have not been overcome by the warlike contagion less than others, but they have themselves contributed to spreading it. I would add (for it is their punishment) that they are victims of the contagion for a longer period : for whilst simple folk constantly submit to the test of every-day action and of experience, and modify their ideas without conscious regret, the intellectual finds himself bound in the net of his own creation and every word that he writes draws the bonds tighter. Hence while we see that in the soldiers of all armies the fire of hate is rapidly dying down and that they already fraternise from trench to trench, the writers redouble their furious arguments. We can easily prophesy that when the remembrance of this senseless war has passed away among the people its bitterness will still be smouldering in the hearts of the intellectual.

Who shall break the idols? Who shall open the eyes of their fanatical followers? Who shall make them understand that no god of their minds, religious or secular, has the right to force himself on other human beings—even he who seems the most worthy—or to despise them. Admitting that your Kultur on German soil produces the sturdiest and most abundant human crop, who has entrusted to you the mission of cultivating other lands? Cultivate your own garden. We will cultivate ours. There is a sacred flower for which I would give all the products of your artificial culture. It is the wild violet of Liberty. You do not care about it. You tread it under foot. But it will not die. It will live longer than your masterpieces of barrack and hot-house. It is not afraid of the wind. It has braved other tempests than that of to-day. It grows under brambles and under dead leaves. Intellectuals of Germany, intellectuals of France, labour and sow on the fields of your own minds: respect those of others. Before organising the world you have enough to do to organise your own private world. Try for a moment to forget your ideas and behold yourselves. And above all, look at us. Champions of Kultur and of Civilisation, of the Germanic races and of Latinity, enemies, friends, let us look one another in the eyes. My brother, do you not see there a heart similar to your own, with the same hopes, the same egoism, and the same heroism and power of dream which for ever refashions its gossamer web. “*Vois tu pas que tu es moi?*” said the old Hugo to one of his enemies. The true man of culture is not he who makes of himself and his ideal the centre of the universe, but who looking around him sees, as in the sky the stream of the Milky Way, thousands of little flames which flow with his own; and who seeks neither to absorb them nor to impose upon them his own course, but to give himself the religious persuasion of their value and of the common source of the fire by which all alike are fed. Intelligence of the mind is nothing without that of the heart. It is nothing also without good sense and humour—good sense which shews to every people and to every being their place in the universe—and humour which is the critic of misguided reason, the soldier who following the chariot to the Capitol reminds Caesar in his hour of triumph that he is bald.

THE RIGHTS OF SMALL NATIONALITIES.

The following letter was written by M. Romain Rolland to Dr. Frederick van Eeden, Editor of "De Amsterdammer Weekblad voor Nederland," and published in that paper on January 24, 1915. As he deals particularly with the Rights of Small Nations, M. Rolland expresses his gratification that his appeal will secure a hearing in Holland. Moreover, he says:—

At a time like this it is good to take one's stand with those free souls who resist the unrestrained fury of national passions. In this hideous struggle, with which the conflicting peoples are rending Europe, let us at least preserve our flag, and rally round that. We must re-create European opinion. That is our first duty. Among these millions who are only conscious of being Germans, Austrians, Frenchmen, Russians, English, etc., let us strive to be men who are men, and who, rising above the selfish aims of short-lived nations, do not lose sight of the interests of civilization as a whole—that civilization which each race mistakenly identifies with its own, as opposed to the other races. I wish your noble country, which has always preserved its political and moral independence among the great surrounding states, could become the heart of this ideal Europe we believe in—the hearth round which shall gather all those who seek to rebuild her.

Everywhere there are men who think thus though they are unknown one to another. Let us get to know them. Let us bring together each and all. Here I would introduce to you two important groups, one from the North and one from the South—the Catalonian thinkers who have formed the society of "Amis de l'Unité Morale de l'Europe" at Barcelona—I send you their fine appeal *: and the "Union of Democratic Control" founded

*Translated into English from Romain Rolland's version in *The Cambridge Magazine*, January 23rd, 1915.

in London and inspired by indignation against this European war, and by the firm determination to render it impossible for the diplomatists and militarists to inaugurate another. I am having the programmes and the first publications sent you.* This Union, whose general committee contains members of Parliament, and authors like Norman Angell and Israel Zangwill, has already got twenty branches in towns in Great Britain.

Let us try and unite permanently all such organizations, though each has its racial characteristics and peculiarities, for all aim at re-establishing the peace of Europe as best they may. With them let us take stock of our united resources. Then we can act.

* * * * *

What shall we do? Try to put an end to the struggle? It is no use thinking of that now. The brute is loose; and the governments have succeeded so well spreading hatred and violence abroad that even if they wished they could not bring it back again into control. The damage is irreparable. It is possible that the neutral countries of Europe and the United States of America may decide one day to interfere, and endeavour to put an end to a war which, if it contiuped indefinitely, would threaten to ruin them as well as the belligerents. But I do not know what one must expect from this too tardy intervention.

In any case I see another outlet for our activity. We cannot prevent now this war being what it is, but at least we must try to make the scourge productive of as little evil and as much good as possible. And in order to do this we must get public opinion all the world over to see to it that the peace of the future shall be just, that the greed of the conqueror (whoever it may be) and the intrigues of diplomacy, do not make it the seed of a new war of revenge; and that the moral crimes committed in the past are not repeated or allowed to stain yet darker the record of humanity. That is why I hold the first article of the "Union of Democratic Control" as a sacred principle:—"No Province shall be

* No. I., *The Morrow of the War*, explaining the Policy of the Union. No. II., *Shall this War end German Militarism?* by Norman Angell. No. III., *War—The Offspring of Fear*, by Hon. Bertrand Russell. No. IV., *The Origins of the Great War*, by H. N. Brailsford. No. V., *Parliament and Foreign Policy*, by Arthur Ponsonby, M.P. No. VI. *The National Policy* as set forth by Mr. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, etc. Price one penny each from the U.D.C., 37, Norfolk Street, Strand, W.C.

transferred from one Government to another without the consent by plebiscite of the population of such province."—We must oppose those odious maxims which have weighed too long on the populations they enslave and which quite recently Professor Lasson dared to repeat as a threat of the future, in his cynical Catechism of Force (*Das Kulturideal und der Krieg*).^{*} And this principle must be proposed and adopted at once without any delay. If we waited to announce it until—the war being over—the congress of the Powers were assembled, we should be suspected of wishing to make justice serve the interest of the conquered. It is now, when the forces of the two sides are equal, that we must establish this primordial right which soars over all the armies.

From this principle we can deduce an immediate application. Since the whole of Europe is disorganized let us profit by it to spring-clean the untidy house! For a long time injustices have been accumulating. The moment of settling the general account will be an opportunity of rectifying them. The duty of all of us who feel for the brotherhood of mankind is to stand for the rights of the small nations. There are some in both camps : Schleswig, Alsace, Lorraine, Poland, the Baltic nations, Armenia, the Jewish people. At the beginning of the war Russia made some generous promises. We have registered them in our minds, let her not forget them! We are as determined about Poland, torn by the claws of three imperial eagles, as we are about Belgium crucified. We remember all. It is because our fathers, obsessed by their narrow realism and by selfish fears, let the rights of the people of Eastern Europe be violated, that to-day the West is shattered, and the sword hangs over the small nations—over you, my friends, as over the country which is befriending me, Switzerland. Whoever harms one of us harms all the others. Let us unite! Above all race questions, which are for the most part a mask behind which pride crouches and the interests of the financial or aristocratic classes dissemble, there is a law of humanity, eternal and universal, of which we are all the servants and guardians ; it is that of the right of a people to rule themselves. And he who violates it is the world's enemy.

* To let a people, he said, or still more a fraction of a people, decide international questions, for instance, which state shall control them, is as good as making the children of a house vote for their father.—It is the most ridiculous fallacy that human wit has ever invented.

Above the Battlefield

BY

ROMAIN ROLLAND,

With an Introduction by

G. LOWES DICKINSON.

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